

THE CONTRIBUTION OF ANCIENT GREECE TO MODERN LIFE

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

PLATO AND HIS DIALOGUES
AFTER TWO THOUSAND YEARS
A MODERN SYMPOSIUM
THE MEANING OF GOOD
JUSTICE AND LIBERTY
A POLITICAL DIALOGUE
RELIGION AND IMMORTALITY
RELIGION: A CRITICISM AND A FORECAST
THE GREEK VIEW OF LIFE
THE MAGIC FLUTE
A FANTASIA IN PROSE AND VERSE
LETTERS FROM JOHN CHINAMAN
APPEARANCES
BEING NOTES ON TRAVEL
AN ESSAY ON THE CIVILIZATIONS OF
INDIA, CHINA AND JAPAN

THE INTERNATIONAL ANARCHY, 1904-1914
REVOLUTION IN RE-ACTION IN MODERN FRANCE, 1789-1871
THE EUROPEAN ANARCHY
WAR: ITS NATURE, CAUSE AND CURE
CAUSES OF INTERNATIONAL WAR
THE CHOICE BEFORE US
ETC.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF ANCIENT GREECE TO MODERN LIFE

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by

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The Contribution of Ancient Greece to Modern Life

N discussing this subject I feel that I must start with a word of explanation. I am not a specialist in Greek language, history, antiquities, or philosophy. All I can say for myself is that I was brought up upon Greek and that after reading much literature in many tongues I find myself returning, with an admiration that continually increases, to Greek books. You must take what I have to say, therefore, as the random thoughts of an amateur. My address will be a kind of *hors d'œuvre*, and the solid dishes will come later. I believe, however, that there is a function for the amateur, and one that becomes more and not less important as specialisation increases; for unless people can find, through the wilderness of learning, some kind of guiding clue, they may easily lose themselves altogether. My business here is to spin a few threads of that clue; and you will receive, I am sure, my contribution in the spirit in which it is offered.

I propose to divide what I have to say into two sections. All divisions are arbitrary in this confusedly interconnected world, and mine, like

others, does a certain violence to the facts. Still it can be made, and, for my purpose, be made usefully.

I intend to speak first of Greek literature as a permanent possession and, secondly, of Greek thought as an important phase in the intellectual movement of mankind. The literature, I shall urge, is—in the phrase of Thucydides—"a possession for ever"; the thought is a recurring stimulus; and both have played a dominating part in the shaping of the Western world.

About Greek literature, the first and most obvious point is its perennial freshness. True, it is between two and three thousand years old, but nevertheless, or even therefore, "age cannot wither it nor custom stale Its infinite variety." For the Greeks did for the first time what Europe, whenever it has been civilised, has done again and seldom done as well. You all know, only too well, those familiar columns and mouldings which reappear so faithfully on our 'classical' buildings. Mr. Bernard Shaw once called this "the umbrella-stand style of architecture"; but I doubt whether he would have used that amusing and apt metaphor if he had once seen the Parthenon in Greek light and air. To me, the Acropolis of Athens, ruined though it is, was one of the most overwhelming sensations I have ever had; and so it must have been to many others. For suddenly the dead came alive. Well, it is the same with

Greek literature. Get back to that, and you touch the fount of that great river that flows on down to our own time, often defiled, sometimes buried, and then breaking out again with something of its original purity and force. Nor has it yet reached that ocean of oblivion into which perhaps it will finally fall. Its danger is rather contamination; and that is why it is always good to return, so far as we can, to the source where first it bubbled up.

The great flowering-time of this Greek literature is very brief. Broadly it extends from the beginning of the fifth to the end of the fourth century B.C. But this statement needs important qualifications. The Iliad and Odyssey belong to a much earlier period, and to a civilisation different in important respects from that of later Greece. But the quality of these epics is Greek through and through, and there is no age, no sex, no kind of man to whom they do not or may not appeal except those whose ears are closed to all literature. Mr. Herbert Spencer, indeed, remarks somewhere that, on endeavouring to read the Iliad and Odyssey in order to get information about the Greek conception of the gods, he found, after a very brief attempt, that there were few things he would not rather do; but Mr. Spencer, great man though he was, was colour-blind on the side of literature. Again, schoolboys, most of them, at any rate when I was at school, were so tormented by the

Greek language that it never occurred to them that anything of interest could be said in that medium. But give people a chance—and many of them will get it best through translation—and the greatness, the beauty, and the humanity of these poems will never fail in their appeal, until or unless what we call human nature is radically changed.

Apart from these two epics, as I was saying, the great period of Greek literature was very brief. Yet brief though the time was the range was extraordinarily wide. The gulf, for instance, between Aeschylus and Euripides was almost as great as that between Shakespeare and Mr. Bernard Shaw, although the lifetimes of these two poets overlapped. Aeschylus, who had fought at Marathon, was the heroic bard, while Euripides was as modern as our own most modern youth. The contrast between them is set forth with insight and wit in "The Frogs" of Aristophanes, and it may be worth while to quote a little in illustration of the point. The two poets are made to defend their respective styles, with Dionysus as a humorous commentator. Says Euripides:

When I received the Muse from you I found her
puff'd and pamper'd
With pompous sentences and terms, a cumbrous huge
virago.
My first attention was applied to make her look
genteelly;
And bring her to a slighter shape by dint of lighter diet:

I fed her with plain household phrase, and cool
familiar salad,
With water-gruel episode, with sentimental jelly,
With moral mincemeat; till at length I brought her
into compass.

From the first opening of the scene, all persons were
in action;

The master spoke, the slave replied, the women,
young and old ones,

All had their equal share of talk—

AESCHYLUS. Come, then, stand forth and tell us,
What forfeit less than death is due for such an inno-
vation?

EURIPIDES. I did it upon principle, from democratic
motives.

DIONYSUS. Take care, my friend—upon that ground
your footing is but ticklish.

EURIPIDES. I taught these youths to speechify.

AESCHYLUS. I say so too.—Moreover
I say that—for the public good—you ought to have been
hang'd first.

EURIPIDES. The rules and forms of rhetoric,—the laws
of composition,

To prate—to state—and in debate to meet a question
fairly:

At a dead lift to turn and shift—to make a nice dis-
tinction.

AESCHYLUS. I grant it all—I make it all—my ground
of accusation.

EURIPIDES. The whole in cases and concerns occur-
ring and recurring

At every turn and every day domestic and familiar,
So that the audience, one and all, from personal
experience,

Were competent to judge the piece, and form a fair
opinion

Whether my scenes and sentiments agreed with truth
and nature.

I never took them by surprise to storm their understandings,
With Memnons and Tydides's and idle rattle-trap-pings
Of battle-steeds and clattering shields to scare them from their senses;
But for a test (perhaps the best) our pupils and adherents
May be distinguish'd instantly by person and behaviour.

EURIPIDES. Thus it was that I began,
With a nicer, neater plan;
Teaching men to look about,
Both within doors and without;
To direct their own affairs,
And their house and household wares;
Marking everything amiss—
'Where is that? and—What is this?
'This is broken—that is gone,'
'Tis the modern style and tone.

DIONYSUS. Yes, by Jove—and at their homes
Nowadays each master comes,
Of a sudden bolting in
With an uproar and a din;
Rating all the servants round,
'If it's lost, it must be found.
Why was all the garlic wasted?
There, that honey has been tasted:
And these olives pilfer'd here.
Where's the pot we bought last year?
What's become of all the fish?
Which of you has broke the dish?'
Thus it is, but heretofore,
The moment that they cross'd the door,
They sat them down to doze and snore.

To all this Aeschylus retorts :

Observe then, and mark, what our citizens were,
When first from my care they were trusted to you;
Not scoundrel informers, or paltry buffoons,
Evading the services due to the state;
But with hearts all on fire, for adventure and war,
Distinguish'd for hardiness, stature, and strength,
Breathing forth nothing but lances and darts,
Arms, and equipment, and battle array,
Bucklers, and shields, and habergeons, and hauberks,
Helmets, and plumes, and heroic attire.

But I never allow'd of your lewd Sthenoboeas,
Or filthy, detestable Phaedras—not I—
Indeed, I should doubt if my drama throughout
Exhibit an instance of woman in love.

but as for Euripides, he continues :

Can the reprobate mark in the course he has run,
One crime unattempted, a mischief undone?
With his horrible passions, of sisters and brothers,
And sons-in-law, tempted by villainous mothers,
And temples defiled with a bastardly birth,
And women, divested of honour or worth,
That talk about life ‘as a death upon earth’;
And sophistical frauds and rhetorical bawds;
Till now the whole state is infested with tribes
Of scriveners and scribblers, and rascally scribes—
All practice of masculine vigour and pride,
Our wrestling and running, are all laid aside,
And we see that the city can hardly provide
For the Feast of the Founder, a racer of force
To carry the torch and accomplish a course.¹

¹ These and the following extracts from Aristophanes are from John Hookham Frere's translation.

I have cited enough to illustrate the difference between these two great tragedians, though the satire is not to be taken too literally. Sophocles lies between Aeschylus and Euripides, perfect in form and matter, and seeming to say like Shakespeare, "Take it or leave it. That is life." That these plays still hold even those who know no Greek is the more remarkable inasmuch as they contain elements foreign to our own drama—those of the chorus and the dance—and one which we try in vain to reproduce effectively on our modern stage. Moreover, this drama, in comparison with that of our own Elizabethan age, has a simplicity and severity which may well seem to us, at the outset, bare; and it is based on legends which have not and cannot have, for us, the traditional significance they had for the Greeks. Yet the greatness of the plays overrides these obstructions, and one need not be a scholar to feel it. I heard the other day of a young policeman who found in a dentist's waiting-room a translation of one of the plays of Euripides, read it through, in those unfavourable conditions, and found it absorbingly interesting. How many such young men may there not be about in our modern world, ripe for the draught that has not yet reached their lips.

But tragedy was only one side of the drama of the Greeks. They also invented and developed

comedy. Of the surviving comedians, the only one of whom anything but fragments is left is Aristophanes; and to my own taste he is the most delightful of the Greek authors. Like Shakespeare, and like so few others, he had the double gift of poetry and laughter; and since his plays are concerned with the actual stuff of Athenian life, its political and religious controversies, war and peace, science and scepticism, the old times and the new, he gives a more vivid picture of that life than any other author. He has, of course, to be read with the remembrance that he is what we should call a Tory. He guyed Socrates rather brutally, and thus, perhaps, was in part responsible for his fate; but he was the kind of Tory one likes, the lover of the old days, the hilarious exposer of pretence and humbug and sham, the man of his own soil in revolt against those bold adventurers who were destroying the world he loved in order to build a greater one. If Dr. Johnson had been a poet and not a hypochondriac he might have been an English Aristophanes. Rabelais is hardly a French one, although he had the temperament, for he was on the side of the new world, not of the old.

There were many other Greek comedians, but their works are lost or survive only in fragments; among them in particular is one great name, Menander. If we are to judge from his reputation

and his influence he should have been a great comedian. In any case he deserves our attention for a moment because he was the master of a new kind of comedy. Aristophanes wrote in the Athens of freedom and political power; but by the time of Menander that had gone for ever. His plays deal with domestic life, and he invented, or developed to perfection, the ‘typical’ personage —the ridiculous and tiresome old man, the youth absorbed in love intrigues, his mistress or his bride, and the clever unscrupulous slave who serves him. Molière, who wrote in an unfree France, like Menander in an unfree Athens, may give to us moderns the best idea of his spirit, though Molière was, I suspect, a greater genius. This comedy of daily life was imitated by Roman comedians and by many others of later ages; but it was the invention of the Greeks. Here, as everywhere, we find them doing for the first time what was to be repeated again and again, sometimes with genius, sometimes with mere imitative pedantry.

I can but touch on the other branches of Greek poetry—the Idylls, the Lyrics, the Elegies, the Epigrams. The Idylls of Theocritus idealise pastoral life, to which he was still close enough to catch from it an authentic note. I have heard a shepherd-boy piping in Greece, and in a moment time was annihilated and I was back

in that lovely, not yet unreal world. Here, as in other fields, the Greeks are the pioneers. Later on Virgil, himself a farmer, catches something of the same spirit. But by the time we come to Milton's *Lycidas* the artificiality of the form is only saved from pedantry by the greatness of the style. We return, you see, continually to the same point—the freshness and first-handedness of the Greeks, which, along with their instinct for form, gives to their literature its imperishable power.

The same vitality is shown in their Lyrics. Pindar, indeed, is so difficult and so untranslatable that perhaps he is likely to remain a more or less sealed book to anyone who does not know Greek, and even to many who do. But those who tackle him seriously and with perception in the original have sometimes judged him to be the greatest and purest of all poets. That he is also one of the most inimitable is sufficiently shown by the failure of 'Pindaric' odes in later times. Of all the Greek forms it is, I think, the most recalcitrant to reproduction, perhaps because it was the most intimately bound up with music. But the best-known lyrics of the Greeks, and those most likely to be loved, are contained in the famous *Anthology*. This collection extends from the eighth century B.C. to the thirteenth A.D., and thus, as Dr. Mackail has pointed out, builds a golden bridge between the ancient and the modern world. I will permit

myself to quote two of these that you may realise the curious persistence, through all changes, of the Greek lyric. The first is the poem by Callimachus in memory of Heraclitus, well known to all lovers of English verse in the following paraphrase by William Cory:

They told me, Heraclitus, they told me you were dead,
They brought me bitter news to hear and bitter tears to
shed.

I wept, as I remembered, how often you and I
Had tired the sun with talking and sent him down the sky.

And now that thou art lying, my dear old Carian guest,
A handful of grey ashes, long long ago at rest,
Still are thy pleasant voices, thy nightingales, awake;
For Death, he taketh all away, but them he cannot take.¹

The second belongs to the tenth century A.D., and was composed in Byzantium by a poet who also wrote a long epic on the raising of Lazarus. That does not sound promising. But listen to these two lines addressed to the god Pan:

Dear Pan linger and let the pipe across your lips be
drawn.

For you shall find your Echo here, here on the sunny
lawn.²

¹ From *Ionica: A Volume of Poetry*.

² From *Translations from the Greek Anthology*, by R. A. Furness.

As Dr. Mackail puts it, “we seem to hear the very voice of ancient poetry, bidding the world a lingering and reluctant farewell.”

I have been speaking so far of poetry, but the Greeks were also great masters of prose; in particular they produced two of the very few great histories of the world. Herodotus, when I was a boy, was still, I think, regarded as an amusing but ignorant and credulous story-teller. We used to recite a rhyme that ran somewhat as follows :

Herodotus, Herodotus,
I blush for you, you ancient cuss !
Those priests of Egypt gammoned you,
It was not very hard to do.
I do not think you'll gammon us,
Herodotus, Herodotus.

We know better now, and judge Herodotus to be at once a serious and informing historian and a great prose poet. For his history is also the epic of the Persian wars, with the moral, so dear to the Greeks, that “Pride goes before a fall.” The other historian, Thucydides, is remarkable for his analysis of the political, social, and psychological effects of war. This is a theme as relevant to our age as to that of the Greeks; for though the weapons of war change, its consequences are always the same, and there are passages in Thucydides which could be taken straight out and applied to our own time.

In oratory the speeches of Demosthenes and of Aeschines are enough to illustrate what that art can be when it is developed by a race naturally capable of speech, and when statesmen, as in the case of Athens, have to persuade large public meetings, if they are to get their policies adopted. No art has declined so rapidly and completely as this, in our own time and in our own country; nor does it seem likely to be revived if, as I think and hope, broadcasting is supplanting public meetings and reports of specialists the debates of Parliament.

Then there is Plato. Being a philosopher he belongs rather to the history of Greek thought than to that of letters. But in his case my distinction breaks down rather badly. For he is also one of the greatest—perhaps even the greatest—of all writers. He was the inventor of the dialogue as a written form; but in inventing it he was endeavouring to recapture the conversational manner of his master Socrates. Socrates, as he tells us, did not believe in books, and there is a great deal to be said for that view. Here are the words Plato puts into his mouth: “For this, I conceive, Phaedrus, is the evil of writing, and herein it closely resembles painting. The creatures of the latter art stand before you as if they were alive, but if you ask them a question, they look very solemn and say not a word. And so it is with

written discourses. You could fancy they speak as though they were possessed of sense, but if you wish to understand something they say, and question them about it, you find them ever repeating but one and the same-self story. Moreover, every discourse, once written, is tossed about from hand to hand, equally among those who understand it and those for whom it is in no wise fitted; and it does not know to whom it ought, and to whom it ought not, to speak. And when misunderstood and unjustly attacked, it always needs its father to help it; for, unaided, it can neither retaliate nor defend itself."

Plato, having actually listened to Socrates and taken part in his discussions, having frequented the same haunts, in the open air, the gymnasium, or the courtyards of houses, having participated in conversations conducted by the most intelligent people of whom we have record, having himself, in a supreme degree, dramatic sense, humour and imagination, has given us, especially in his earlier work, an impression as vivid in its way as that of Aristophanes himself of the life of ancient Athens. It must, however, be added that his work suffers from the defect inherent in all philosophic dialogues. Constantly the human and dramatic element is compelled to give place to the intellectual. It is this that makes Plato at once so fascinating and so exasperating, both to

those who come to him for literature and to those who come for philosophy. The former are interested in the drama, the beauty and the fun, the latter in the doctrine; and this dilemma becomes the more serious as the doctrine begins to take the first place and the other element becomes more episodic and irrelevant. Yet, even as I say this, I feel inclined to recant, so great is my admiration for Plato.

The mention of the dialogue form reminds me of another great writer whom I am unwilling to pass over—Lucian. He lies outside the great period, as do the poems of Homer. But as they were centuries earlier, he is centuries later. He belongs to the second century A.D. and was a Syrian, not a born Greek. Yet so perfect is his manner, so classical his Greek, that it is difficult to believe that he was not a contemporary of Menander. He is also the most modern of all the Greek authors. He reminds me, both in spirit and form, of Anatole France—gay, sceptical, brilliant, and of the most exquisite manners and charm. He was the climax of a very long tradition and is, so far as I know, the only Greek author extant, of his late period, who is still fully and delightfully alive. If anyone is preparing to begin the study of Greek I believe there is no author he would find better and more pleasant to read.

This must conclude my impertinently brief survey of Greek literature. I will turn now to the other more difficult part of my address and speak of the substance and spirit of Greek thought. Here, too, the Greeks were the great originators. They learned, no doubt, much of the material of their knowledge from Egypt and elsewhere, but their attitude was wholly original. Their early thinkers of the seventh and sixth centuries B.C. were, above all, unprofessional. They were men first and philosophers and scientists afterwards; politicians, soldiers, physicians, inventors, engineers, founders of states, as well as astronomers and mathematicians. They thus belong to the same class as the great men of the fifteenth century, such as Leonardo da Vinci or Michael Angelo—the class of which the last representative in Europe was Goethe. Emerging in the midst of an ignorant and superstitious society they were credited with miraculous powers, and strange legends grew up about them, such as that of Empedocles throwing himself down the crater of Etna. They were no doubt, some of them, charlatans as well as men of genius—a type well known and always interesting. Many of their speculations may seem to us now merely absurd; we can hardly guess what they meant when they taught that the world was made of water, or air, or fire, and we smile a little when they equate

justice with the number four, or tell us that it is not the same sun that rises next morning as the one that rose to-day, or that eclipses occur because the sun tumbles into a hole when it comes to certain uninhabited regions of the earth. But really to smile is to be unimaginative and therefore unintelligent. For put yourself back to that early age and imagine the world to be dawning upon thought as a new and astonishing marvel. Forget what you know of Ptolemy and Galileo and Copernicus, forget all that you have read in modern text-books, and dare you say you would have guessed better or as well yourself?

And there were, of course, much better guesses than those to which I have referred. Xenophanes, for instance, concluded from the existence of shells on mountains that the earth had once been covered by a kind of wet mud. Anaxagoras conjectured that the moon received its light from the sun, and Pythagoras that the earth was a sphere. The line between guessing and science was not yet clearly drawn, but the spirit of science, the curiosity and courage to inquire and speculate freely, was born; and it was not long before science developed in the full modern sense. In the fourth century B.C. Aristotle was laying the foundations of logic, biology, physiology, psychology, political science, and ethics.

In the third, Aristarchus developed the view that the earth rotates on its axis and revolves about the sun, and a little later Archimedes of Syracuse discovered the theory of the lever, the composition of forces and the principle of the equilibrium of fluids and floating bodies. He also invented military machines, thus anticipating the worst achievements of modern science, and, by a piece of ironical nemesis, was killed by a Roman soldier while intent on a mathematical problem.

Most of the teachings of the Greek scientists have been lost to us, and even the works of Aristotle we do not possess in their entirety, nor in the very words of the master. In any case, in the region of Natural Science, it is not to be supposed that we should have anything now to learn from the Greeks. But one problem of great importance is raised by the history of Greek science. Why did it not develop continuously? Why was it extinguished so early and so completely? For though it flourished and developed in Alexandria until the second century A.D. and was not finally extinguished there until the city was taken by the Arabs, elsewhere it seems to have simply petered out. Why did this happen? I dare not attempt any simple answer. No doubt, as always, there were many contributory causes. But there is one consideration which I wish to bring before you,

because it has, I think, an important bearing upon our own time.¹

I will put it like this. The first thing men have to do is to live, and in order to live they must somehow make themselves at home in the world. That is the meaning at bottom of their religions. Now the Greek religion with which most of us are familiar (I cannot here digress upon the more primitive beliefs that festered below the surface) is perhaps the most human that ever grew up, for it peopled the world with beings having similar passions to men, only more powerful and not subject to death. To these beings the Greeks could refer the course of events, to them they could pray for aid, and in them they found the plastic forms that inspired their literature and their art. But the new science offered them nothing of all this; on the contrary, it bid fair to destroy the foundation of their life. We have already noticed the reaction against science of the conservative Aristophanes. He himself, it is true, was as ready as anyone to make fun of the gods. But this kind of fun was quite compatible with a regard for the old religion. The proper parallel, I think, is the kind of jesting which is found in some of the mediaeval Christian plays. If you really

¹ I am much indebted, in what follows, to a suggestive little book by Gerald Heard, entitled *This Surprising World*.

believe your religion, someone has said, you won't mind laughing at it. An admirable example of Aristophanes' treatment of the theme is to be found in the play called "The Frogs," from which we have already quoted, where his main object is to defend Aeschylus against Euripides. Dionysus is there represented as a braggart and a coward, and is flogged by Aeacus, the judge below, as a thieving slave.

Again, in another famous play, the poet does not scruple to represent the Birds as conspiring against the gods. They propose to build a wall between Heaven and earth, bigger than Babylon; and

As soon as the fabric is brought to an end,
A herald or envoy to Jove we shall send,
To require his immediate prompt abdication;
And if he refuses, or shows hesitation,
Or evades the demand, we shall further proceed,
With legitimate warfare, avow'd and decreed;
With a warning and notices, formally given,
To Jove, and all others residing in heaven,
Forbidding them ever to venture again
To trespass on our atmospheric domain,
With scandalous journeys, to visit a list
Of Alcmenas and Semeles; if they persist,
We warn them that means will be taken moreover
To stop their gallanting and acting the lover.

Another ambassador they will send to men
To notify briefly the fact of accession;
And enforcing our claims upon taking possession;

With orders in future, that every suitor,
Who applies to the gods with an offering made,
Shall begin with a previous offering paid
To a suitable Bird, of a kind and degree
That accords with the god, whosoe'er he may be.
In Venus's fane, if a victim is slain,
First let a Sparrow be feasted with grain.
When gifts and oblations to Neptune are made,
To the Drake let a tribute of barley be paid.
Let the Cormorant's appetite first be appeased,
And let Hercules then have an Ox for his feast.
If you offer to Jove, as the sovereign above,
A Ram for his own, let the Golden-crown,
As a sovereign Bird, be duly preferr'd,
Feasted and honour'd, in right of his reign,
With a jolly fat pismire offer'd and slain.
EUELPIDES. A pismire, how droll! I shall laugh till I
 burst!
Let Jupiter thunder, and threaten his worst!

If Men are recalcitrant their crops will be destroyed
and the eyes of their cattle pecked out. If they
are obedient the Birds will destroy the locusts and
midges for them, show them where treasure is
buried and tell them when the sea will be calm.
They will even give them a share in their own
long life; for who does not know that a raven
outlives five generations of men. Moreover, if
Birds are their gods, worship will be economical,
for Birds require no temples, but live in the trees.
The project is successfully carried out and the
gods are reduced to sending Poseidon, Heracles
and a barbarian god to sue for peace. Heracles
is represented as a stupid glutton, the barbarous

god as a fool, and Poseidon is easily outwitted by the champion of the Birds. The play is supposed to be, among other things, a political allegory, but that aspect of it need not detain us now. I cite it as showing the freedom with which the gods could be handled by a poet who, nevertheless, had no idea of destroying popular religion.

But besides this attitude of comedy there is another, that of Plato and of Euripides, which is inspired by a moral revolt against the ancient religion. Aristophanes, as we have seen, parodied Socrates as a representative of Natural Science; and Socrates was in his earlier life interested in physical speculations. But later he recanted. The physical scientists, Plato makes him say, never explained anything. If you asked for causes, they talked about ether and water and many other strange things. But that is not an explanation. The only real explanation would be in terms of value; one which would show you that it was *good* that everything should be just as it is.

Now this is the exact opposite of the spirit of science. For science is concerned not with goodness or badness but with facts and their interpretation. It is true that Socrates was, in fact, undermining Greek religion, just as much as science was; but he had a different motive. His objection to the gods was not that there was no evidence of their existence, but that their moral character

was disreputable. It was in the interest of true religion and ethics that he criticised popular beliefs, not in that of natural science. And the same is true of Plato. He was a logician and mathematician, but nowhere in his dialogues does he show any interest in natural science, with the doubtful exception of the *Timaeus*. Very characteristic is the passage in the *Republic*, where he depreciates the study of astronomy on the ground that it deals merely with the motions of material bodies, whereas true science would concern itself with the problems of motion as such. Modern Physics appears to be taking a similar course, and I am not concerned to criticise the Platonic attitude; but it is clear that it strikes at the root of all Natural Science. It was Aristotle, Plato's pupil, who carried that to its highest point, and he did so by turning away from his master's methods and making concrete and detailed observations of facts.

The movement away from Natural Science had thus already begun before that science reached its highest point. It was a diversion from the study of things to the study of values; and this movement, in the end, was destined to prevail over the other. But here, too, it was Greek thought that led the way; for it was the Greeks who originated all the great systems of ethics. These systems were handed on to the

Roman world; but the Romans, like the English, were pre-eminently practical—as one of their historians puts it: “One Cato is worth three hundred Socrates’s!” So far as they theorised about ethics it was the Stoic philosophy that attracted them on account of its moral earnestness. I know of only one really philosophic spirit in the Roman world, and that was Lucretius; but he, though a very great poet, was not and did not profess to be an original philosopher. His object was to commend to a Roman noble, and one of very dissolute character, the views of his master Epicurus; and I doubt whether he was very successful in that piece of propaganda.

No doubt if the practical utility of science for war, communications, or industry had been as great then as it is in our own time, the Romans might have fostered such studies, as we do. But in those respects Greek science was comparatively undeveloped. The Romans, therefore, did not find science sufficiently useful to counterbalance what they probably regarded as its futility and its disintegrating force. For this they paid the penalty; for their civilisation perished by a kind of atrophy, and there descended upon the Western world an age of darkness in which nothing remained of the Greek spirit but a gradually ossifying literature and so much of the Græco-Roman tradition as was embedded

in the amalgam of Christian theology. Almost everything that had been discovered and known was forgotten for a thousand years, and, what was more, the spirit itself was extinguished.

But almost at the moment when the darkest age descended upon Europe, a new light sprung up in the Near East. In the eighth and ninth centuries Syrian Christians were at work in the Court of the Caliphs translating Greek books. The Arabs thus recovered Greek music and Greek astronomy, and invented some new astronomical instruments. This movement might be called not the 'new' but the first birth of Arabian science. Like the rebirth later in the West, it was the result of Greek inspiration, and it is interesting to note that it was destroyed by the Christians. With the fall of Cordova and Seville in the thirteenth century Arabian astronomy was extinguished; but about the same time began, partly through translation from the Arabic, the rediscovery of Aristotle in the West, and its incorporation into scholastic philosophy. By the fifteenth century the European Renaissance was in full swing in Italy. It was inspired by the rediscovery of Greek letters; and that led to the rebirth of Natural Science. But the infant thus reincarnated outgrew, with extraordinary rapidity, its previous stature, so that Greek Natural Science is now, for the most part, a mere historical curiosity.

Moreover, this new modern science devised elaborate means of applying its discoveries to the mechanism of life. Thereby it has transformed the whole technique of industry, and in consequence our political and social institutions. The application of science on this tremendous scale is a thing quite new in history, and one pregnant, not only with good but with evil, beyond our imagination to conceive. In consequence there has recurred, but now in a far more urgent form, the old dilemma of Græco-Roman society. How are we to deal with science? Shall we allow it to destroy us, or shall we destroy it to save ourselves? Neither way seems a good one; but is there not another alternative? There is, clearly, if we would but take it. Our science, we saw, is the product of the Greek spirit; but so is our ethics. In the Græco-Roman crisis these two movements fought one another, till ethics, in the end, destroyed science. What we have now to do is to reconcile the antagonists—to apply ethics to science and science to ethics. That movement, I think, has already begun; and on its success depends the future of civilisation.

The theme of your studies in the next few weeks is the contribution of ancient Greece to modern life; but what you may well be considering, behind the literature, the art, and the history, vitalising all, giving to all its deepest meaning,

is this urgent question: Can the Greek spirit, rising again more splendid and more potent than before, accomplish the salvation of mankind, in the greatest crisis with which it has yet been confronted? For remember, Greek studies are nothing unless they live; and they live only when we breathe into them the life of our own age.

